

# THE DENISON REVIEW

## The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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### CHAPTER I.

OAKLEY was alone in the bare general offices of the Huckleberry line, as the Buckhorn and Antioch railroad was commonly called by the public, which it betrayed in the matter of meals and connections. He was loitering lazily over his desk with a copy of the local paper before him and the stem of a disreputable cob pipe between his teeth.

The business of the day was done, and the noise and hurry attending its doing had given way to a sudden hush. Other sounds than those that had filled the car since morning grew out of the stillness. Big drops of rain driven by

the wind splashed against the unpainted pine door which led into the yards or fell with a gay patter on the corrugated tin roof overhead. No. 7, due at 5:40, had just pulled out with twenty minutes to make up between Antioch and Harrison, the western terminus of the line. The 6 o'clock whistle had blown, and the men from the car shops, a dingy, one story building that joined the general offices on the east, were straggling off home. Across the tracks at the ugly little depot the ticket agent and telegraph operator had locked up and hurried away under one umbrella the moment No. 7 was clear of the platform. From the yards every one was gone but Milton McClintock, the master mechanic, and Dutch Pete, the yard boss. Protected by dripping yellow oilskins, they were busy repairing a wheezy switch engine that had been incontinently backed into a siding and the caboose of a freight.

Oakley was waiting the return of Clarence, the office boy, whom he had sent uptown to the postoffice. Having read the two columns of local and personal gossip arranged under the heading "People You Know," he swept his newspaper into the wastebasket and pushed back his chair. The window nearest his desk overlooked the yards and a long line of shabby day coaches and battered freight cars on one of the sidings. They were there to be rebuilt or repaired. This meant a new lease of life to the shops, which had never proved profitable.

Oakley had been with the Huckleberry two months. The first intimation the office force received that the new man whom they had been expecting for over a week had arrived in Antioch and was prepared to take hold was when he walked into the office and quietly introduced himself to Kerr and Holt. Former general managers had arrived by special after much preliminary wiring. The manner of their going had been less spectacular. They one and all failed, and General Cornish cut short the days of their pride and display.

Naturally the office had been the least bit skeptical concerning Oakley and his capabilities, but within a week a change was patent to every one connected with the road. The trains began to regard their schedules, and the slackness and unthrift in the yards gave place to an ordered prosperity. Without any apparent effort he found work for the shops, a few extra men even were taken on, and there was no hint as yet of half time for the summer months.

He was a broad shouldered, long limbed, energetic young fellow, with frank blue eyes that looked one squarely in the face. Men liked him because he was straightforward, alert and able, with an indefinite personal charm that lifted him out of the ordinary. These were the qualities Cornish had recognized when he put him in control of his interests at Antioch, and Oakley, who enjoyed hard work, had earned his salary several times over and was really doing wonders.

He put down his pipe, which was smoked out, and glanced at the clock. "What's the matter with that boy?" he muttered.

The matter was that Clarence had concluded to take a brief vacation. After leaving the postoffice he skirted a vacant lot and retired behind his father's red barn, where he applied himself diligently to a cigarette.

When the cigarette was finished the wretch bethought him of the purpose of his errand. This so worked upon his fears that he bolted for the office with all the speed of his short legs. As he ran he promised himself notionally that "the boss" was likely to "skin" him. But whatever his fears he dashed into Oakley's presence panting and in hot haste. "Just two letters for you, Mr. Oakley," he gasped. "That was all there was!"

He went over to the superintendent and handed him the letters. Oakley observed him critically and with a dry smile. For an instant the boy hung his head sheepishly, then his face brightened.

"It's an awfully wet day; it's just raining!"

Oakley waived this bit of gratuitous information.

"Did you run all the way?"  
"Yep, every step," with the impudent mendacity that comes of long practice.

"It's rather curious you didn't get back sooner."

Clarence looked at the clock.  
"Was I gone long? It didn't seem long to me," he added, with a candid he intended should disarm criticism.

"Only a little over half an hour, Clarence. I guess you may as well go home now."

"Good night, Mr. Oakley," with happy alacrity.  
"Good night, Clarence."

The door into the yards closed with a bang, and Clarence, gleefully skipping the mud puddles which lay in his path, hurried his small person off through the rain and mist.

Oakley glanced at his letters. One he saw was from General Cornish. It proved to be a brief note, scribbled in pencil on the back of a telegram blank. The general would arrive in Antioch that night on the late train. He wished Oakley to meet him.

The other letter was in an unfamiliar hand. Oakley opened it. Like the first, it was brief and to the point, but he did not at once grasp its meaning. This is what he read:

Dear Sir—I enclose two newspaper clippings which fully explain themselves. Your father is much interested in knowing your whereabouts. I have not furnished him with any definite information on this point, as I have not felt at liberty to do so. However, I was able to tell him I believed you were doing well. Should you desire to write him, I will gladly undertake to see that any communication you may send care of this office will reach him. Very sincerely yours,  
EZRA HART.

It was like a bolt from a clear sky. He drew a deep, quick breath. Then he took up the newspaper clippings. One was a florid column and a half account of a fire in the hospital ward of the Massachusetts state prison and dealt particularly with the heroism of Roger Oakley, a life prisoner, in leading a rescue. The other clipping, merely a paragraph, was of more recent date. It announced that Roger Oakley had been pardoned.

Oakley had scarcely thought of his father in years. The man and his concerns—his crime and his tragic atonement—had passed completely out of his life, but now he was free, if he chose, to enter it again. There was such suddenness in the thought that he turned sick on the moment; a great wave of self pity enveloped him, the recollection of his struggles and his shame—the bitter, helpless shame of a child—returned. He felt only resentment toward this man whose crime had blasted his youth, robbing him of every ordinary advantage, and clearly the end was not yet.

True, by degrees, he had grown away from the memory of it all. He had long since freed himself of the fear that his secret might be discovered. With success he had even acquired a certain complacency. Without knowing his history, the good or the bad of it, his world had accepted him for what he was really worth. He was neither cowardly nor selfish. It was not alone the memory of his own hardships that embittered him and turned his heart against his father. His mother's face, with its hunted, fugitive look, rose up before him in protest. He recalled their wanderings in search of some place where their story was not known and where they could begin life anew, their return to Burton, and then her death.

For years it had been like a dream, and now he saw only the slouching figure of the old convict, which seemed to menace him, and remembered only the evil consequent upon his crime.

Next he fell to wondering what sort of a man this Roger Oakley was who had seemed so curiously remote, who had been as a shadow in his way preceding the presence, and suddenly he found his heart softening toward him. It was infinitely pathetic to the young man, with his abundant strength and splendid energy, this imprisonment that had endured for almost a quarter of a century. He fancied his father as broken and friendless, as dazed and confused by his unexpected freedom, with his place in the world forever lost. After all, he could not sit in judgment or avenge.

So far as he knew he had never seen his father but once. First there had been a hot, dusty journey by stage; then he had gone through a massive iron gate and down a narrow passage, where he had trotted by his mother's side, holding fast to her hand.

All this came back in a jerky, disconnected fashion, with wide gaps and lapses he could not fill, but the impression made upon his mind by his father had been lasting and vivid. He still saw him as he was then, with the

gnarly prison pallor on his haggard face—a clumsily made man of tremendous bone and muscle who had spoken with them through the bars of his cell door while his mother cried softly behind her shawl. The boy had thought of him as a man in a cage.

He wondered who Ezra Hart was, for the name seemed familiar. At length he placed him. He was the lawyer who had defended his father. He was puzzled that Hart knew where he was. He had hoped the little New England village had lost all track of him, but the fact that Hart did know convinced him it would be quite useless to try to keep his whereabouts a secret from his father even if he wished to. Since Hart knew, there must be others also who knew.

He took up the newspaper clippings again. By an odd coincidence they had reached him on the very day the governor of Massachusetts had set apart for his father's release.

### CHAPTER II.

OAKLEY drew down the top of his desk and left the office. Before locking the door, on which some predecessor had caused the words, "Department of Transportation and Maintenance; No Admittance Except on Business," to be stenciled in black letters, he called to McClintock, who, with Dutch Pete, was still fussing over the wheezy switch engine.

"Will you want in the office for anything, Milt?"

The master mechanic, who had been swearing at a rusted nut, got up from his knees and, dangling a big wrench in one hand, bawled back, "No, I guess not."

After turning the key on the department of transportation and maintenance, Oakley crossed the tracks to the station and made briskly off uptown, with the wind and rain blowing in his face.

He lived at the American House, the best hotel the place could boast.

In Antioch Oakley was something of a figure. He was the first manager of the road to make the town his permanent headquarters, and the town was grateful. It would have swamped him with kindly attention, but he had studiously ignored all advances, preferring not to make friends. In this he had not entirely succeeded. The richest man in the county, Dr. Emory, who was a good deal of a patriot, had taken a fancy to him and had insisted upon entertaining him at a formal dinner. It was the most impressive function Oakley had ever attended, and even to think of it still sent the cold chills coursing down his spine.

That morning he had chanced to meet Dr. Emory on the street, and the doctor, who could always be trusted to say exactly what he thought, had taken him to task for not calling. There was a reason why Oakley had not done so. The doctor's daughter had just returned from the east, and vague re-

western towns, Antioch had known dreams of greatness, dreams which had not been realized. It stood stock still in all its raw, ugly youth, with the rigid angularity its founders had imposed upon it when they lacked and bewed a spot for it in the pine woods, whose stunted second growth encircled it on every side.

The Emory home had once been a farmhouse of the better class. Various additions and improvements gave it an air of solid and substantial comfort unusual in a community where the prevailing style of architecture was a square wooden box built close to the street end of a narrow lot.

The doctor himself answered Oakley's ring and led the way into the par-

lor. A fair haired girl, trimly gowned in an evening dress that to his unsophisticated gaze seemed astonishingly elaborate. But he could not have imagined anything more becoming. He decided that she was very pretty. Later he changed his mind. She was more than pretty.

For her part Miss Emory saw merely a tall young fellow, rather good looking than otherwise, who was feeling nervously for his cuffs. Beyond this there was not much to be said in his favor, but she was willing to be amused.

She had been absent from Antioch four years. These years had been spent in the east and in travel abroad with a widowed and childless sister of

experience. Her father and mother were not so well satisfied with the situation; they already recognized that it held the elements of a tragedy. In their desire to give her every opportunity they had overreached themselves. She had outgrown Antioch as surely as she had outgrown her childhood, and it was as impossible to take her back to the one as to the other.

The doctor patted Oakley on the shoulder.

"I am glad you've dropped in. I hope, now you have made a beginning, we shall see more of you."

He was a portly man of fifty, with kindly eyes and an easy, gracious manner. Mrs. Emory was sedate and placid, a handsome, well kept woman, who administered her husband's affairs with a steadiness and economy that had made it possible for him to amass a comfortable fortune from his straggling country practice.

Constance soon decided that Oakley was not at all like the young men of Antioch as she recalled them, nor was he like the men she had known while under her aunt's tutelage—the leisurely idlers who drifted with the social tide, apparently without responsibility or care.

He proved hopelessly dense on those matters with which they had been perfectly familiar. It seemed to her that pleasure and accomplishment, as she understood them, had found no place in his life. The practical quality in his mind showed at every turn of the conversation. He appeared to hunger after hard facts, and the harder these facts were the better he liked them. But he offended in more glaring ways. He was too intense, and his speech too careful and precise, as if he were uncertain as to his grammar, as, indeed, he was.

Poor Oakley was vaguely aware that he was not getting on, and the strain told. It slowly dawned upon him that he was not her sort, that where he was concerned she was quite alien, quite foreign, with interests he could not comprehend, but which gave him a ranking sense of inferiority.

He had been moderately well satisfied with himself, as, indeed, he had good reason to be, but her manner was calculated to rob him of undue pride. He was not accustomed to being treated with mixed indifference and patronage. He asked himself resentfully how it happened that he had never before met such a girl. She fascinated him. The charm of her presence seemed to suddenly create and satisfy a love for the beautiful. With generous enthusiasm he set to work to be entertaining. Then a realization of the awful mental poverty in which he dwelt burst upon him for the first time. He longed for some light and

Continued on last page.

### ... PROMINENT K. of P. VISITOR. ...



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rior after relieving him of his hat and umbrella.

"My wife you know, Mr. Oakley. This is my daughter."

Constance Emory rose from her seat before the wood fire that smoldered on the wide, old fashioned hearth and gave Oakley her hand. He saw a state-

der father's. She was, on the whole, glad to be home again. As yet she was not disturbed by any thoughts of the future. She looked on the world with serene eyes. They were a limpid blue and veiled by long dark lashes. She possessed the poise and unshaken self confidence that come of position and

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"Will you want in the office for anything, Milt?"

mors were current concerning her beauty and elegance. Now, women were altogether beyond Oakley's ken. However, since some responsive courtesy was evidently expected of him, he determined to have it over with at once. Imbued with this idea, he went to his room after supper to dress. As he arrayed himself for the ordeal he sought to recall a past experience in line with the present. Barring the recent dinner, his most ambitious social experiment had been a brakeman's ball in Denver years before when he was conductor on a freight.

It was still raining, a discouragingly persistent drizzle, when Oakley left his hotel and turned from the public square into Main street. This Main street was never an imposing thoroughfare, and a week of steady down-pour made it from curb to curb a river of quaking mud. It was lit at long intervals by flickering gas lamps that glowed like corpulent fireflies in the misty darkness beneath the dripping maple boughs. As in the case of most